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SIPDIS
TELEGRAM

July 28, 2004

To: No Action Addressee
Action: Unknown
From: AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI (ABU DHABI 2520 - ROUTINE)
TAGS: PGOV, OIIP, PREL, KPAO
Captions: None
Subject: DEPUTY COMMANDER URGES AL-ARABIYA MANAGEMENT TO MAKE
IRAQ COVERAGE MORE BALANCED
Ref: None

UNCLAS ABU DHABI 02520

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CXABU:
ACTION: PAO
INFO: USLO DAO ECON POL DCM
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ACTION: PAO

DISSEMINATION: PAO
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: CDA: RALBRIGHT
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CLEARED: USLO: RSIMM, ECON: OJOHN

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RUEAHQA/OSAF WASHDC//IA//
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RUEADWD/HQDA WASHINGTON DC//DALO-SA//

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 002520

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [OIIP](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [TC](#)

SUBJECT: DEPUTY COMMANDER URGES AL-ARABIYA MANAGEMENT TO
MAKE IRAQ COVERAGE MORE BALANCED

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a visit to Dubai's Media City on July 19, General Lance Smith, Deputy Commander CENTCOM, told the new management team at Al Arabiya that the Arab satellite station put too much emphasis on violence and that he would like to see more even coverage on the situation in Iraq. Representatives from Al Arabiya insisted that the station's only agenda was to become the premier channel in the Middle East and that Al Arabiya had no desire to serve as a mouthpiece for terrorists. They blamed Al Jazeera for sensationalist coverage of the violence in Iraq, which sometimes made Al Arabiya and other Arab stations, which tried to present a more balanced view, appear less credible to Arab audiences. They pointed to a lack of access to USG officials as contributing to the unbalanced coverage, voiced their perception that US officials in Baghdad gave better access to Al Jazeera and urged CENTCOM to appoint an Arabic speaking spokesperson to get out the US point of view. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On Monday, July 19, General Lance Smith, Deputy Commander CENTCOM, accompanied by Centcom staff officers, Chargé d'Affaires, USLO BPAO, and FSN Information Specialist, visited Media City headquarters in Dubai, and later met with managers of Al Arabiya, also in Media City, followed by a broadcast interview with Al Arabiya. At the first meeting, Mahmoud Fakhour, Commercial Operations Manager of Media City, and Ramy Jallad, Sales Manager of Media City, briefed the General on the Media City's success. General Smith next met with management at Al Arabiya: Nakhle Elhage, Director of News, Shafaat Khan, Business Manager, Fadi Ismail, General Manager, Muhammad Rashed, Asst. to the COO and Legal Counsel, and Abdul Rahman, Chief Operating Officer of the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). The second meeting was followed by a 30-minute interview, broadcast July 19 on al Arabiya's "From Iraq" program.

Background: Media City Dubai

¶3. (SBU) Media City is part of Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid's (MBR) strategic plan to attract 4 million new residents to Dubai by 2010, and to increase Dubai's economic independence from oil. Media City was launched in January 2001, and now boasts over 1,890 companies, covering IT, education, media, and knowledge transfer. By 2005, they are hoping for 2,000 companies, employing 50,000 "talented workers." MBR has five areas of focus: he wants Dubai to be an international center for technology, media, finance and business, tourism, and for health, leisure and entertainment. Altogether, 400,000 square meters of land have been covered in 3 years. They have allotted 10 times that area for future building on Sheikh Zayed road, and all of the plots have already been sold.

General Criticizes Biased Coverage

¶4. (SBU) Speaking to a recently restructured management at Al Arabiya, General Smith outlined USG concerns with the station's coverage, saying that there was too much of an emphasis on violence, and that he would like to see both sides being reported. He admitted that the military could be more forthcoming with information. He explained that Central Command 2 has restructured and put Public Affairs under the Chief of Staff. This allows a broader view, and a greater ability to be responsive. He stated that "anytime, you can talk to us; I'm always available."

Not a Mouthpiece for Bin Laden

15. (SBU) Al Arabiya management emphasized that they have no "agenda" aside from becoming the premier channel in the Middle East. They said that they want Al Arabiya to be "accurate, timely, and responsible," with no desire to be the mouthpiece of Bin Laden. Muhammed Rashed, Legal Counsel to the station, said that Bin Laden's followers "do not represent Arabs or Saudis; they are a bunch of terrorists with their own agenda." They accused rival Al Jazeera of being sensationalist and of making Al Arabiya look like a sell-out if it doesn't go out of its way to report bad news. On the issue of airing tapes from Al Qaeda, they stated that they have in some cases refused to air tapes only to see another outlet such as Al Jazeera air them.

No Access to USG; Need USG Arabic Spokesperson

16. (SBU) Al Arabiya said that they have trouble gaining access to important locations or information. They cited a recent air strike in Fallujah and their inability to get USG information regarding the intent and the results of the air strike. As a result, they were not able to broadcast the USG side of the story, and other, inaccurate reports remained unchallenged. They also complained that they were not allowed access into the Saddam trial. They claimed that Al Jazeera gets more scoops from the US military. They noted that the lack of a USG Arabic-speaking spokesperson (in contrast to the British) is a problem and urged CENTCOM to appoint a spokesperson who could engage with the media in real time in Arabic.

The US and the Arab World: Mutual Misperceptions

17. (SBU) All participants agreed that there were serious public misperceptions on both sides about the true nature of the respective societies. Al Arabiya management said that they were "doing their part" to correct Arab stereotypes about America. They noted that many in the region do not understand what America stands for. In October, Al Arabiya will air a four-hour documentary using information from reporters sent to the US, in order to introduce it to people in the region. Referring to the US, Mr. Rashed said, "Some like it; some hate it; few understand it." He noted many activities under way to bridge the cultural gap, including an International Film Festival planned for December. He suggested doing a documentary on US soldiers - their lives in Iraq and their attitudes toward Iraqis and their situation.

Comment

18. (SBU) Management at Al Arabiya went out of their way to blame competitor Al Jazeera for setting the bar so low on the portrayal of violence in Iraq. Their claim that they are forced to use similar images to hold market share is one we can continue to debate, but it is not a practice we are likely to change absent intensive engagement with them to get out our story. The request from Al Arabiya's new team for greater access to U.S. officials and readiness to broadcast their views is an open door that we should work to exploit. After General Smith's departure, Al Arabiya's new chief suggested to Charg that given the rapid expansion of Arab media outlets in Dubai's Media City, the U.S. should consider posting to Dubai a press attach who could engage with the pan-Arab satellite stations on regional issues. We note that CENTCOM is considering basing an Arab American civilian in Doha to do media outreach.

